

Bigger and Better

Mountain View High School

Mountain View–Los Altos Union High School District

Mountain View, California

Description: Suburban

Enrollment: 1,400

AP courses offered: 12

Highlights: AP participation growth

Best practices: Open-door policy

A couple of years ago, Mountain View High School did something radical: They flung wide open the doors to their Advanced Placement program. AP enrollment went from 264 to 438 during the first two years of the open-door policy and the number of AP sections increased accordingly.

Their district allows students and families to select their high school and the AP offerings have attracted a crowd to Mountain View. The school anticipates a 17 percent enrollment increase for 2002–2003.

“Everyone’s belief is that if you build it, they will come. If you raise the bar they will succeed, and that is what I see happening,” said Principal Patricia J. Hyland. She was the early adopter who was instrumental in the reforms.

“I sat in on conversations where students were excluded from participation because they didn’t go to the meeting for the class or didn’t turn in an essay on time,” she recollected. “[Taking AP] was a capricious decision and that was silly.”

Letting any student opt for AP seemed like a logical solution, and a practical one.

“Ultimately, the parent has the right, no matter what we say, to put their kid anywhere they want,” Hyland noted.

The school compiles significant data to present its case for AP success. For example, some parents worried that an open-door classroom would erode the quality of learning for traditional honors students. But the school’s data shows that the best prepared students continue to receive grades of 3 and above on the AP Examinations.

“The kids who were getting the 3s, 4s, and 5s are still getting their 3s, 4s, and 5s, and now more kids are getting those grades,” Hyland said. “Percentages [of high AP grades] are not as good as they used to be. That is to be expected,” she said of the statistical effect of increased numbers of examinees.



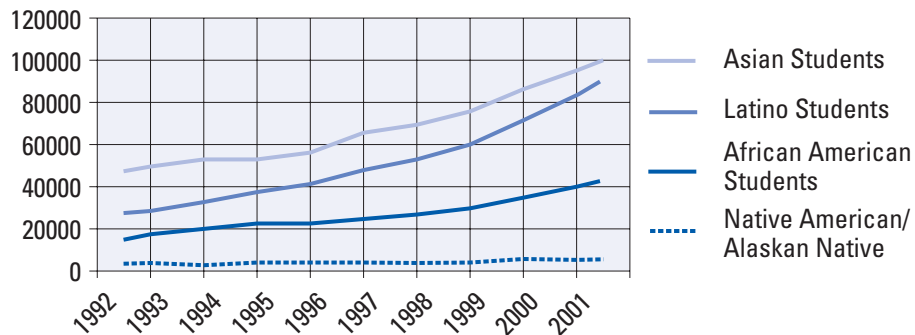
David Rygiol
AP Studio Art
Mountain View
High School

By analyzing data on students from their feeder middle schools, Hyland can ensure that high-performing students continue to soar, while she takes steps to encourage underrepresented students to strive for AP and honors courses. For example, an AVID program at one feeder middle school provides an important mechanism.

“Those kids are going to flow right in, make a seamless transition, and move right into AP classes,” Hyland explained. “So we’re tracking it to make sure that we’re reaching the students that have heretofore been underrepresented.”

Open access has led to dramatic AP growth, a two-thirds increase in participation since 1999–2000. The school’s Latino population declined from 17 percent in 2000–2001 to 13 percent in 2001–2002. At the same time, Latino student representation in AP has nearly held steady. Latino students represent seven percent of AP and honors students. Increasing their participation is very much on the school’s agenda.

Growth in Minority Student Participation in AP: 1992–2001



“Even with opening the doors, we’re increasing the number of students but we have yet to reach parity [among underrepresented minority students] with our enrollment in the school,” Hyland said. (White students have near identical parity and Asian students are overrepresented in AP.)



Minjeong Kim
AP Studio Art
Mountain View
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To address this, the school is reaching out to Latino parents through a Spanish counseling effort to educate families about the need for a rigorous curriculum. “We are trying to create the culture, but it does not happen overnight,” Hyland said.

In another measure, teachers take a diversity training program to make sure they are adept at working with students from many backgrounds. Teacher training also incorporates vertical teams and differentiated instruction, one of the latest pedagogical approaches. Instead of lecturing, teachers tap a variety of instructional techniques to accommodate different styles and levels of learning.

“Some students are going to be at your top level no matter what, and you can give them assignments appropriately,” Hyland said. “Another student is going to be challenged by a lesser assignment but still meet the criteria of the course. So it differentiates what you expect of different students based on their ability levels.”

Obviously, this takes a very well prepared and flexible teacher.

“It does take a talented teacher, and I am very, very fortunate,” Hyland said of the quality of her instructional staff.

The curriculum also has an open door at Mountain View. Students choose their courses from a college-style course catalog and receive counseling about recommended sequences. A yearly “academic arena” provides a day for students to talk to teachers in each core academic department—science, math, social studies, and English—to go over the sequence of courses for the next year.

“It’s sort of an open house to give kids as much information as possible and support informed decision making so that they don’t get themselves in over their heads and want to make changes,” Hyland said.

As for AP Exams, they are voluntary and the school is working to increase the numbers of students taking them. (Mountain View uses fee waivers and finds the resources to ensure that any student can afford to take AP Exams.)

“The thing I am most passionate about is that every student deserves the opportunity to try, and we have no business closing that door to them,” she said.

